

## Chester's Story – A Long Detour

By Kateri Nelson

I was always impressed by guide dogs and their “mysterious powers”, even more so after reading a very touching story published in *Reader's Digest* when I was a teenager. It was about a German Shepherd from the The Seeing Eye school who had saved her owner's life when the elevator doors had opened on an empty shaft. How amazing was that! But I didn't have any disability so how could I possibly share my life with an exceptional dog trained to help people? Several years later I discovered what was then referred to as “zootherapy”. That's what I could do: visit hospitals with my perfectly trained, well-behaved companion, undoubtedly a female German Shepherd just like the dog in the story. And that was the beginning of a very long quest...

Our love for Labrador Retrievers started over 30 years ago with a shy, unsocialized 4-month old big-boned puppy named Ralph. Even when he reached 103 pounds, Shy Ralph never approached strangers, even the best-intentioned dog lovers. Everyone – except for his family – was scary. Then there was Super Joe who needed a job so badly that he wound up working as a drug detection dog for the Queen of England (we lived in Canada).

A few years later, Gus showed up – the only puppy in the litter that the breeder felt the urge to name due to his generous waistline. After a long car ride, Barking Gus arrived home and became Friendly Chester, a dog so determined to meet people that any passer-by would give him an excuse to squeeze through an open door and escape. Then our 85-pound bundle of joy would knock over the unaware pedestrian, which would usually signal the end of the visit.

One day he even followed a jogger to the local community center where he crashed a swimming lesson for toddlers and expectant mothers. Yes, Chester's energy level was unrivaled.

In his senior years, Chester “told” us that he needed a friend, someone who would be willing to lick his ears in exchange for some quality playtime with his toys. So one day we found Sofie at a local shelter – and together Chester and Crazy Sofie became the escape artists of all times, the welcoming committee of our neighborhood, two free spirits joyfully galloping through flower gardens and plowing through manicured lawns.



*Chester always had a hard time judging the size of his bed.*

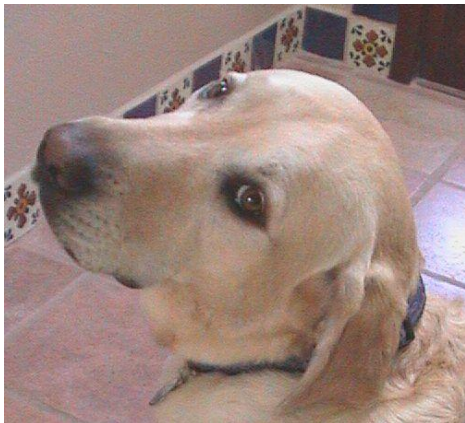
After Chester passed away, Sofie was quite depressed so the search for another companion became an urgent matter. Maybe she would like a puppy to protect and nurture? After all, she was a female... But the only Lab breeder we would consider had a litter of black puppies and since we always had yellows (except for Super Joe who was chocolate), how could we possibly “read” a black dog with dark eyes?

We briefly looked at the puppies but quickly dismissed them, and instead adopted Serious Spencer from a local rescue. The year was 2006 and I had finally found my therapy dog, the one who would pave the way to the prestigious Delta Society. Life was good.



*Sofie and our son hit it off from the start.*

Spencer was so calm, so well behaved; he was the perfect gentleman who could sit at a patient's bedside for hours. Unfortunately, after only one year of service, Spencer tragically passed away, losing a short battle with cancer.



*Spencer was our serious Lab, probably because he had spent four months of his life in a shelter while his former owner was going through the judicial system for animal abuse.*

So once again Sofie was alone, but this time our grief had an added dimension: I was without a partner. How was I going to continue the journey without a friend at my side? Was there another dog out there that would be worthy of the *green vest*?

A few weeks later, Stefanie - our Lab breeder friend –suggested, once again, a black puppy. A litter of nine had just been born, and maybe it was time to try something new, maybe we were ready for a... *black dog!* So, bravely, we decided to take the plunge and that afternoon I drove to Stefanie's house to take care of the paperwork.

Three sweet, calm, composed adults greeted me at the door, two females and a male. The male was huge and as black as coal. His name was Fender. He was not quite two years old and his owner had recently returned him "because he couldn't keep up with the other hunting labs."



*This is Fender when I first met him – 96 pounds of pure English lab!*

When Fender came up to me, there was something comforting and familiar about him: he was a black version of Chester while exhibiting Spencer's calmness. I immediately mentioned to Stefanie that Fender would make a great therapy dog.

Then, out of the blue, she generously offered to “lend” me Fender for training and therapy work since our new puppy wouldn’t be able to visit hospitals for a couple of years anyway. I was thrilled! Fender would be a therapy dog between shows (he was a striking male so Stefanie was planning on showing him) and that would be fine with me. I would take him to obedience classes, and hopefully one day, register us as Pet Partners with Delta Society!

The following week, I was on my way to pick up Fender for his first obedience class when Stefanie called: she had noticed about a month ago that he was limping so the veterinarian had x-rayed his shoulders and was suspecting *osteochondritis dissecans*, or “OCD”.

Because OCD is a genetic disease in Labs, she couldn’t possibly use him as a stud and would have to remove him from the gene pool. Would we want to adopt him? I almost drove into a ditch. Was I dreaming? Has she just offered us her “top dog”? Spencer had left a huge void and just like that, someone was going to fill it... maybe. So I picked up Fender for his class and told Stefanie that I would take him home afterwards to see if the rest of the family would accept the new candidate.

During the class, Confused Fender -- who liked to lean on my leg when he was sitting -- kept tilting his head backwards to stare at me, as if he had been asking: “Can you love me?” Needless to say, I couldn’t concentrate for two hours – every time I looked at Fender, I would meet his big inquisitive eyes, his puzzled expression. What was he thinking? Did he know who I was? Did he know how much I already adored him? What would the rest of the family say? Would Sofie accept him as a new roommate? Would my son love him just the way he loved every dog we ever had? Would my husband find in Fender a new “buddy”?

Well, of course it all went well. For some reason, we all gathered in my son’s bedroom, and suddenly, as if he knew, Fender stopped staring at me and started to explore the rest of his new world. Needless to say, we had found *our dog*: a big-hearted beast named Fender. Soon after that, we took him to a specialist who refuted the OCD diagnosis and instead attributed the lameness to an old trauma injury probably sustained on some hunting expedition. He will probably need shoulder surgery down the road but for now daily joint supplements – for the rest of his life – is the treatment of choice.

Now I’m sure you’re wondering why I keep referring to Fender when the story is about Chester. Well, Fender was born on February 10, 2006, and yes, he was one of the plump, jet-black puppies we had seen shortly after losing Chester. We had turned him down, not knowing that we were foolishly passing on *our dog*: the most perfect black lab. That litter had been born 10 days after Chester’s passing and 10 days before his birthday, so renaming Fender “Chester” was just the normal thing to do.





*When we went to see the litter born in In 2006, I took this picture. I believe it's Chester – the clueless expression plus the wrinkles on the nose are quite unique.*

The other day, as Perfect Chester and I were leaving the ER department, a little boy, who was patiently waiting in triage with a hospital bracelet around his tiny wrist, blared out: “Oh Wow! What a cool dog!” He must have been barely five years old, looking lost in his big chair, with streaks of tears still staining his rosy cheeks.

So I went up to him with my big black dog and the first question he asked as he was petting Chester was: “Does he help people?” I proudly answered “Yes, he does!” And that’s when I realized that Chester does have “mysterious powers”: he helps everyone, including me, his humble partner. 🐾